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ABSTRACT

Designed to be of interest to anyone concerned with the study of American literature in China or anyone contemplating teaching there, this paper is an edited version of the taped transcript of a panel discussion among five Fulbright professors of American literature and American studies i China. The paper begins with brief, focused introductory comments by each of the five professors on some aspects of his experience of teaching American literature in China: Topics are as follows: (1) Selecting American Works for Study in China; (2) The Discussion Method; (3) Lecturing; (4) Critical Thinking; and (5) Creativity in the Literature Classroom. Following these introductory comments, the the transcript of the panel discussion, which includes remarks and questions from the audience, is presented. (SR)

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Teaching American Literature in China: Panel Discussion at Sichuan University

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In mid-April, 1988, I organized a symposium on "Teaching American Literature in China" on the campus of Sichuan University, in Chengdu, where I was the Fulbright professor of American literature at Sichuan University. The other four participants were also 1987-88 Fulbright professors of American literature and American studies at other key universities in China: Rufus Cook, of Shandong University (and Florida Institute of Technology), Roy E. Gridley of Beijing University (and University of Kansas), Jack Scherting of Nanjing University (and Utah State University), and William Slaughter of Beijing Foreign Studies University (and University of North Florida).

At the three-day event each of us gave formal academic papers on our specialties. Without question, however, the highlight of the symposium was a less formal panel discussion with a large and involved audience of Chinese teachers and students. They were mostly from Sichuan University, but some came from other universities in Chengdu and from other universities in China. This paper is an edited version of the taped transcript of that panel discussion. It should be of interest to anyone who has a concern about the study of American literature in China or who may contemplate teaching there.

The panel opened with each of the five Fulbright professors giving a brief, focused introductory comment on some aspect of his experience of teaching American literature in China. I reproduce those five introductory comments below, edited and shortened somewhat. After the more formal opening presentations, we invited comments and questions from the audience. I was moderator of the discussion. In editing the discussion, I have slightly rearranged certain portions to make the published version easier to follow, shortened some of the more diffuse comments, and eliminated most of my own remarks in calling on, and thanking, individual speakers. I have decided not to indicate when the audience laughed. I might note, however, that one of the joys of teaching American literature in China is the sense of humor of one's Chinese colleagues and students.

Selecting American Works for Study in China

by Jack Scherting, Utah State University

If professors were asked to list twenty important American authors, Henry James' name would almost certainly be on every list. The name of his friend and contemporary Owen Wister would be on on very few or none. And for this reason, one would feel almost guilty to assign in a course on American literature Wister's *The Virginian* rather than Henry James' *The Ambassadors*. I mention this fact only to introduce a question that has been given far too little thought in designing American literature courses for Chinese students. The question is a simple one: "What criteria should be applied in selecting works for study by Chinese students?"

The question is not easily answered because of complex considerations, all of which are related in one way or another to a second question of even greater importance: "What purpose is served by teaching American literature in China?" Allow me to isolate a few possibilities:

1. Any educated person should develop an appreciation of literature composed in at least one other language.

2. Studying American literature will improve one's ability to use the English language effectively.

3. In order to take its rightful place in the international academic community, China needs scholars capable of conducting original research on American literature.

4. Understanding great literary art will make a person a better human being and a more responsible citizen.

All four of these purposes are valid, and any one or all could be cited to justify the courses and course content of an English curriculum designed for Chinese students.

From what I have seen, however, the American literature courses in Chinese universities seem to have been designed with little regard for these purposes. Rather, they are modeled on courses found in American universities. Presumably, those courses were designed to meet the needs of American students. This bothers me because I do not believe that such courses—and the usual literary works associated with them—effectively serve their intended purpose in the Chinese system of higher education.

But there is one more purpose for teaching American literature in China. This one should be given first priority in curriculum development:

5. The task of modernizing China requires a large number of educated Chinese who have a solid working knowledge of cultures in more developed nations, such as the United States, and the ability to communicate effectively with the people of those nations.

I do not mean to suggest that the other four reasons are without merit. I do mean to assert that, given the great needs and limited resources of education in China, utility rather than beauty should be the test for developing a list of works to be read by Chinese students of American literature.

If we accept this fifth statement of purpose, then there is obviously a need to reevaluate the curriculum. As a first step we should ask, "What sort of literature is most likely to accomplish the purpose identified above?" And the answer is, "Works that provide direct and meaningful insights into American culture." I will hasten to add that such works are to be found scattered here and there among the selections in widely used anthologies. This is,

however, coincidental, because works chosen for inclusion in anthologies typically have not been selected because they reveal cultural trends or unique and enduring national values.

The works immortalized in most anthologies constitute an accepted body of works taught to generation after generation of American university students. The question is, "How much of this body of works is relevant to the needs of Chinese students who are expected to assist in the process of restoring and modernizing this great civilization?" To state the question in another way, "What works should be dropped and what works should be added?"

These questions have some important pedagogical implications. It is very difficult to separate *how* we teach from *what* we teach, for the simple reason that our teaching methods are of necessity based on a set of assumptions about our purpose in teaching. And our sense of purpose, in turn, very much influences the material we select and assign.

My own assumptions concerning purpose will—if and when I have a choice—lead me to select poems by Thomas Hornsby Ferril rather than those of Thomas Stearns Eliot; James Michener's *Centennial* rather than John Dos Passos' *USA*; Herman Melville's "Tartarus of Maids" rather than "Bartleby the Scrivener"; *The Great Gatsby* rather than "The Wasteland." And, finally, I am certain that centering my Chinese students' effort and my limited time with them on Owen Wister's *The Virginian* will serve their needs far better than dedicating equivalent time and effort to the study of Henry James' *The Ambassadors*.

The Discussion Method

by Peter G. Beidler, Lehigh University

It would be absurd to assert that American teachers all teach alike, or that Chinese teachers all teach alike. Still, it seems generally accurate to assert at least one broad generalization about the difference in method between teachers of literature in America and teachers of literature in China: literature teachers in China tend to prefer the lecture method, whereas their counterparts in America tend to prefer the discussion method.

For the most part, the teaching of literature by Chinese teachers in China is done through lectures. Teachers stand or sit at the front of a classroom full of students. The teachers talk. The students take notes.

In America, on the other hand, the teaching of literature tends to be done through discussion. The teacher may give some brief lectures, but by and large American teachers see their role as one of asking questions of the students. They try to get the students to express their own reactions to the literature they have read, and often appear almost reluctant to give their own reactions.

There can be no doubt that teaching literature in China presents a significant challenge for those American teachers of literature who prefer discussion over lecture. That challenge is, quite simply, trying to make the discussion method work here. We tend to find that there is very little in the educational or cultural background of our Chinese students that makes them feel comfortable with our efforts to encourage them to take an active part in discussing literary works.

When American teachers come to China and try to use the discussion method, both they and their students generally experience frustration. The students tend to expect and want something quite different from us. The teachers tend to feel a keen sense of failure and often give up and lecture, instead.

Those of us who believe in the discussion method are aware, of course, that there are advantages to the lecture method. For example, it puts "experts" in control and lets them share directly with students their knowledge and experience and wisdom. And we are aware that there are disadvantages to the discussion method. For example, it takes more time to "cover" the same material. Still, we prefer the discussion method for most of what we teach here in China. We prefer it for at least ten reasons:

1. We consider that it is part of our task as foreign teachers in China to give our students practice in English conversation. If we spend all our time lecturing to them, our students will get practice listening to, but not speaking, English.

2. We feel an obligation to give our Chinese students a taste of what an American classroom is like. Many Chinese hope to have an opportunity to study in America, and our being here is a good chance to prepare them for that experience.

3. We feel that our students, the future leaders in a modernizing China, will gain a measure of self-confidence if we force them to get some experience in the "public speaking" that the discussion method requires.

4. We feel that when we lecture to our students we make them dependent on us for the next lecture. If we encourage them to do the creative reading and thinking that are necessary for a discussion, we are helping to make them independent of us.

5. We think of teaching not as an opportunity for us teachers to report the truth to our Chinese students, but as an opportunity to uncover the truth with our Chinese students.

6. We think that the key word in classroom teaching is "interaction," not "information." If we wanted merely to give Chinese students information, we could more efficiently write it in book form or send videotapes of our lectures.

7. We think that questions are more important than answers, because questions tend to open the mind, whereas answers tend to close the mind.

8. We think that if we tell students something, they will write it down and probably forget it. If we can get our students to tell us something, they may not write it down but they will be more likely to remember it.

9. We feel that literature, by its very nature, demands a personal response from readers. It is less important that we tell our students what we think about Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" than that we ask our students to tell us what they, quite personally, think about it.

10. We feel that the discussion method is the method of love. Most of us entered this profession not only because we love literature, but also because we love students of literature. We find that we can give expression to both loves at the same time if we insist that our students talk with us about literature.

Those of us who are committed to the discussion method think it is worth the effort it takes to try to involve our Chinese students in classroom discussions. We try lots of different methods: we tell our students that a substantial part of their final grade will be based on a "class grade"; we give daily quizzes; we simplify our questions; we phrase and then rephrase our questions; we break our students into small discussion groups; we cajole; we insist; we persist.

Lecturing

by Roy E. Gridley, University of Kansas

We have all observed this phenomenon: university students go to the cinema, sit together in a dark room. They absorb the sights and sounds, the language and action and music of the filmed "narrative." Then the lights come on, and the students begin to leave. Many of them begin to talk among themselves about the film. "Did you like it?" "What did you think of that killer?" "Did you notice the time the camera faded out and then zoomed in again. . . ." "But it ended all wrong. The woman should have . . . ." And so on. If they have seen an especially "good" or "important" film, the students are lively and intense as they discuss, analyze, criticize, judge what has just moved them intellectually and emotionally.

These students are engaged in one of the great intellectual delights of learning and of education—*talking about* an aesthetic experience they have all shared. From their lively talk they gain more than enjoyment: they sharpen their minds; they improve their skills of expression and argumentation, and they broaden their awareness and capacities for even greater appreciation of future intellectual and aesthetic experiences.

As a teacher of literature I want my students to engage in such lively *talking about* poems, stories, novels, plays, essays. I want them to come out of the classroom the way they come out of the cinema—discussing, arguing, criticizing, appreciating. I am not concerned that this talk go on within the classroom, but I want the "conversation" I initiate in my lectures to continue in the hallways, the streets, the parks, the dining halls, the dormitories, and—yes—even the crowded buses they take home.

Lively discussion within the classroom is rare in my experience both in America and in China. This does not worry me because I have come to understand the reasons for the failure of the discussion method. One of the reasons is the nature of the literary experience itself. The cinema-film experience is a communal one: it is shared by a large number of people gathered in the same place at the same time. Reading literature is, by contrast, a very lonely activity—one book, one student in a library chair, a dorm bed, under a tree. When the student-reader gets "caught up" by the literary work, gets excited about its ideas, its style and technique, its emotional power, the student is alone. At best, he or she can interrupt a fellow student and say: "Hey! Read this! Isn't that an original image?"

Literature departments try to overcome the limitations of reading as a solitary activity by having "classes" where once a week or so the student-readers can gather to hear talk if not actually talk themselves about a literary text all have been assigned. The "class" as a place for the students themselves to talk has at least two flaws.

First, the literature classroom comes equipped with an older person who is being paid to talk about literature. This person, the teacher, likes to talk and is usually good at talking. This person also possesses information that must be imparted largely through lecture. This paid talker judges the quality of the students' talk. It is understandable that students— American and Chinese—are reluctant to talk openly in the presence of this paid professional talker and judge.

Second, when the students come out from the cinema-film, they have all just seen the film. When they gather in a classroom once or twice a week, some have read the text a week ago, some last night, some not at all. The solitary reading experience has been a fragmented one; communal talk about these individually diverse experiences is bound to be fragmentary

also. The teacher's dilemma is to try to "guide" these fragments into something understandable to all at the expense of time needed to impart, by lecture, information about the text.

Considering these two flaws in the reasoning behind the discussion method, my question is not why the discussion method does not work better for us, either in America or in China, but why we should even try to use it in our classrooms.

My American students are generally reluctant to talk in class. My Chinese students are almost totally reluctant to do so. This classroom silence does not greatly disturb me. I worry that they are not talking outside of class. In my classes, I use a few tricks to encourage students to become familiar with the literature I have assigned so that they will want to talk about it after my lectures are over:

1. In class, I always read aloud from the assigned text. With short poems it is easy, but short passages from longer works can also be read aloud. This way I try to approximate the cinema experience of getting the text before all students at the same time and place. It becomes a communal, shared experience. (Lazy students who have not read the assignment like this trick!).

2. I encourage the memorization of poems and prose passages. In America, books have been plentiful for many generations. Hence, the need—the art—of having the book in your head has been lost.

3. Because I want students to have the text fresh in mind before they hear talk about it, I frequently give quizzes or exams at the beginning of class. This trick has instilled some healthy fear and provoked some anger and resentment, but it makes students study the text harder.

4. Because students are reluctant to talk in class, I require them to write out questions or comments and hand them to me before class begins. This "written discussion" tells me whether they have read the text with care and thought. I can then read aloud their comments and then discuss them with the class.

I have been blessed with excellent students here in China. On the whole, my Chinese students are more intelligent, harder working, and more dedicated than my American students. I hope my teaching tricks have added to their knowledge and appreciation of the American literary texts they have read with such care.

Critical Thinking

by Rufus Cook, Florida Institute of Technology

The virtues of Chinese students have been widely praised by American teachers returning to the United States. In general, Chinese students are far more respectful, disciplined, and hard-working than their American counterparts, and considerably less cynical and self-seeking. At the same time, of course, they suffer what, from the point of view of American professors, must be regarded as the defects of these virtues: they are far too passive in their approach to learning, too willing to accept authority, too uncritical. Only once in seven months of teaching at Shandong University have I had a student flatly disagree with one of my interpretations—and even he hung nervously around after class to beg my pardon, fearful that I was offended.

Chinese students' lack of intellectual confidence can be accounted for in a variety of ways, I suppose. Depending on the kind of society you live in, it need not even be regarded as

a lack. Given the goals presently contemplated for China's modernization, however, some changes in methods of instruction might eventually prove desirable. At any rate, it is perhaps worthwhile to reflect briefly on the capacity for critical thought that I find lacking in many of my students.

By "critical thought" I mean something a little more specific than independence of mind—something different at least from being opinionated. We all know people full of original opinions who, in a more serious sense, are quite mindless, incapable of abstraction or of systematic inquiry. And it is this quality that I mean by "critical thinking": the capacity to define a problem, then organize an investigation, a body of evidence, in keeping with that problem. It is the capacity, admired above all others by Plato and practiced so exquisitely by Socrates, to follow the argument wherever it may lead, to respect its integrity.

The absence of this critical capacity has struck me most forcefully in some of my third-year postgraduates, the students working on their masters theses. In addition to their unconscious plagiarism, their anxious search for sources, for authoritative support and confirmation, I have been frustrated most frequently by their inexperience in intellectual inquiry, by their inability to define a topic or develop it.

I recall one student in particular, one of my brightest and most articulate students, who, every time I tried to get him to elaborate his thesis topic, to outline it in specific detail, began to summarize for me the plots of novels. The ability to select details and to organize them for a purpose—to follow the argument—was something he seemed never to have been taught. He was a slave to the novelist's purpose and organization. The same problem arose when I pushed him to define the significance of his paper: what was its context, to what was it relevant, what were its implications? He had simply not had the training necessary to reflect effectively on the general nature and import of his thesis.

And, neither, for the most part, have my other Chinese students. Full of literary history, of critical categories and terminology, they seem helpless when challenged to think in some significant new way for themselves. In place of genuine inquiry, what I often get from them is some mechanical or formulaic method or procedure: beginning an essay with a formal definition of terms, for example, or with a statement about the author's life or reputation, or with a summary of scholarship. They tend to organize a chapter around some pre-established classification scheme scarcely related to their purpose. It seems that they will do anything to postpone thinking, to avoid the responsibility of deciding for themselves what is significant or problematic, what logically follows from what.

The same problem exists among American students, of course: the same search for mechanical structures, the same flight from responsibility. Due partly perhaps to differences in methods of instruction and partly to differences in traditional social attitudes and values, however, the problem seems more severe in China. Indeed, the defect—if you want to regard it as a defect—may be so rooted in the traditional values, in China's particular forms of social organization, that it can be corrected only as the country emerges—for better or for worse—into the modern world. It can be corrected only as western notions of individual rights take deeper root here.

I must qualify that remark saying that some passivity, some respect for the ideas of others, some concern for the communal good, is quite a positive feature of Chinese students. Certainly, I do not think it is altogether good that American students are more boisterous, more disagreeing, than Chinese students. Sometimes I think they are just showing off, just disagreeing for the sake of disagreeing. They just want to be—by god!—independent. They

won't put up with having anyone else's ideas imposed on them. This kind of showy individualism can be destructive to a class and to a student's own development as a critical thinker. Still, some individualism is necessary for engagement in true critical thinking, true critical inquiry.

Fostering that individualism, of course, will take time. As an immediate practical measure, I would recommend an increased emphasis on composition in Chinese foreign language departments, particularly the composition of critical or analytical essays. My students have had precious little of that experience, and while their oral English is often excellent, while they generally read well and possess a superb command of literary history, their minds have been neglected. They have too little knowledge of intellectual method. They need to write more, not only as a means of improving their spelling and syntax and diction, but as a means of training in critical thought, in the skills of invention, inference, and organization, which composition can provide.

Creativity in the Literature Classroom

by William Slaughter, University of North Florida

Creativity depends, for its very existence, on mystery, which is at the heart of all living and all learning. It depends on hidden meanings, always just beyond our reach, which are absolutely necessary to both our physical and metaphysical well-being. Lecturers in their lecture rooms are dedicated to finding, and hence doing away with, hidden meanings. But these lecturers only deceive themselves, as well as many, too many, of their students, because students as readers of original texts are creative, by themselves, if their teachers do not interfere with them, do not get too much in their way. My twenty years of teaching, if they have taught me anything, have taught me that. How can we, as teachers, license our students as readers? How can we empower them? How can we give them their own voices back?

Justice has not been done the reader in literary criticism and theory. The author has gotten his due in biography and psycho-biography. The text has gotten its due in close reading, the so-called "new" criticism. But the reader, except for the hypothetical or "ideal" reader, has until recently been ignored. Two books are representative of the kind of literary criticism and theory, the kind of reading, that I am recommending here: *Reader-Response Criticism* (ed. Jane P. Tomkins, Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1980) and *The Reader in the Text* (ed. Susan Suleiman and Inge Crosman, Princeton Univ. Press, 1980). As we come to understand reader response criticism, we will come to understand that students must be creative in their responses to literature.

Literature is real. Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief" is the first and last principle of reading literature. Imagination is real. About that there can be no doubt, or why read literature at all? For diversion and amusement only? I am serious. Poems, stories, and plays have it in their power to change the minds and hearts and lives of their readers. Literature is equipment for living. To quote from Wallace Stevens' "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," the role of the poet is to "help people live their lives." Speaking quite personally, "literature is my life-support system."

We must re-mind ourselves. Most of us teachers have spent our professional lives getting ready to do what we do, in the classroom, on any given day. If we have stuffed ourselves with "the facts," then we must unstuff ourselves. If we think of ourselves as inexhaustible sources of information, then we must exhaust our sources. Most of us have publications. But our

students, quite simply, do not care about that. We must give our students, as well as our texts, our "passionate attention" (the phrase belongs to Auden). We must re-mind ourselves what our first readings of the poems, stories, and plays that we are "talking" about in our classrooms felt like. We must re-mind ourselves what being a student felt like. We must unprepare ourselves as teachers.

"Plagiarism" is a word I have intentionally not used—until just now—because it makes me shudder. It names a disease endemic to our field, literature. How can we immunize ourselves and our students against it? Here is an anecdote, if not an antidote: I was living in London, a while back, teaching there. One morning, reading *The Times*, I discovered that art historians at the British Museum had discovered that only a fraction of the work hitherto attributed to John Constable, the British painter, had, in fact, been done by him. It seems that he had set up a kind of cottage industry, wherein and whereby his children did much of his painting for him. He taught them his style, his technique. Having learned it, they did much of his work for him. All he had to do was sign his name, and in the marketplace, at auction, a painting would fetch his price. There is a moral here for all of us, teachers and students alike. What, *what*, will we sign our names to?

I am going to get out of your way as quickly as I got into it. And I suggest that we all get out of our students' way as quickly as we got into it. Our presences as creative readers of original texts—if that is what we are, if that is what we make of ourselves—will still be felt by our students long after we are gone, long after they are gone. We all have our own lives in the "real" world to live.

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Beidler: That completes the introductory remarks. Our purpose in all this talk has been to get you thinking about certain questions related to teaching literature in China, especially American literature. We five do not agree with each other about many of these issues, and we know that many of you will not agree with many of us. Let us talk about these disagreements. I remind you now that this is, after all, a discussion session, and now we want to hear from you. You may ask questions of the panel, or you may make your own responses to the ideas we have raised, or you may raise your own ideas. I have told my fellow Fulbrighters that here at Sichuan University we have the sharpest, bravest, and most articulate students and faculty in China, and I want you now to prove that I am right.

Shi Jian: I want to respond to Mr. Slaughter's remark about creativity. I think I share the same opinion. I graduated here in 1977, and I have been teaching English language and literature courses here on this campus since then. At the very beginning, after my graduation, in the first two or three years of teaching, I was teaching just as I was taught here on this campus. So I thought I was the authority standing on the stage in front of the blackboard, and I wanted the students to listen to my opinions. Step by step, I have come to see this is a wrong way, a wrong teaching method. So, I agree: give back the voice to the students and teach them to trust themselves. The teachers should get out of the way of the students.

Slaughter: It seems to me that students sitting silently in their classrooms or lecture halls year after year are like dormant volcanoes. When you finally get the chance to have a

classroom or lecture hall of your own, you explode. You have all that knowledge in there, and you've never had the chance to express it orally. In speech you get it out, and I think probably that in your first two or three years of teaching you experienced exactly that. You had the need to get all of that out and only when you had done that have you reached the point where you could reflect on what your own thinking about teaching, your own strategy and style, might be.

And I also have this observation. You were talking about your own career from the time you graduated until the present. You triggered a response in my mind. I have sat on five masters degree oral examinations here in China. It occurred to me that these students had six years of university education, and they spent six years in silence in their classrooms or lecture halls, and now, to get their masters degrees, they are being asked to talk. It's more like an interrogation than an examination, and these young adults, 22, 23, or 24 years old, come to the examination quaking, absolutely quaking. They are terrified because they have to speak to win their right to get their degree. And then suddenly they have a masters degree and they are teachers. They walk into a classroom full of silence. They fill that silence with their own words. Suddenly, they are the paid talkers. What I'd like to know is, how do you get from absolute silence to total speech? There is no preparation in the strict lecturing system for that transition.

Xiao You-ran: My first question is for Mr. Scherting. You spoke of what is suitable and interesting in our American literature courses. In the United States, some Americans are learning Chinese literature, as well. So I have the same question: what kinds of Chinese literature are most suitable and interesting? My second question is really a comment on Mr. Beidler's class. I first must say I appreciate very much his method of teaching to the students—the discussion method. Here is my comment. We are passive. Here I must admit that we are passive compared to the American students. But, Mr. Beidler, you might improve a little bit in your use of questions in class. That is, you just mentioned about your frustration at your initiating a discussion in class. Well, sometimes I just feel like a child in a kindergarten to be asked such simple questions. If you want us to argue, give us a point to argue about. Several times in our class we got into a heated discussion. That was because we had a point to argue, and someone to argue with.

Beidler: There is something in there for both of us, Jack. Do you want to say something?

Scherting: Yes, I do, but this is not the time to talk about specific works of literature, Chinese or American, to be taught. I do want to say something about the young woman's last comment, however, about the discussion method. I have not had much luck here in China with discussion. I do think that part of the fault was mine, that I asked questions to which I already had the answer. Students are intelligent, and they soon caught on that I wanted them not really to discuss, but to figure out what I thought and then say that. Well, that is not really the discussion method, and it does tend to make students feel like kindergarten students.

Beidler: Well, Jack, since you responded to my question, I will respond to the question originally directed to you, about the purpose of teaching American literature in China. One of my discoveries about teaching American literature in China is that my most fundamental purpose here is not to teach literature, or language, or culture, though of course I do teach all three. The most important thing I do is teach

something about teaching. Oh, I teach some stories by Hawthorne, and I talk about the style of his language, and I talk about the cultural foundations of his stories, but what my students may remember most is the *way* I taught Hawthorne. I refused to lecture. I refused to give information. I asked questions. Some of those questions did not work well, because I was too rigid in the answers I was seeking. Some of my questions seemed too trivial to my better students, like Xiao You-ran there, who felt she was back in kindergarten. But they were questions, and I feel now that my approach, flawed as it was in the details, may be the most important legacy of my stay in China. In any case, I must tell you how pleased I am to have one of my students, in this public forum, criticize me. I am honored that she trusts me enough to know that I will not punish her for speaking her mind, and delighted that she is brave enough to say what she believes.

Zheng Yi: I think our discussion about teaching American literature is quite interesting. But we should not forget that in many English departments in China we offer American literature to the undergraduates, as well as to postgraduate students. I teach such a course here. My problem is that my students have not so much literary background. I have a big class and limited time with it. My problem is how to bridge the cultural barriers for the students. I mean that my students will start, for the first time, having the first chance to get in touch with American literature or Western literature. They do not know the background—social, religious, or ideological—on what happened. They do not know how to approach the actual text. Can you tell me how you deal with these problems in your teaching?

Gridley: That's a very good question. You have brought up a major problem, not only in China but also in America. American students, too, are ignorant of their culture. They are particularly ignorant of the older texts. So there is still a great deal of information, background information, that can be given most effectively in lectures. I do think that the lecture content can be given in a small informal group, just through talking with students rather than reading a lecture. But, really, we teachers have the information necessary to understand the literature, and we have to give this information to them. Then, after class, as they leave the classroom, they can talk about this information.

As for that other question raised a while ago by the young woman, about how much American students know about Chinese literature, the answer is, nothing! That is unfortunate, of course, but understandable. American undergraduates do not specialize in the way Chinese undergraduates do. They have more general courses than Chinese students. I occasionally try to teach some Chinese literature, but it is not easy. For example, I taught a book by Lao Zi. I taught it in a realism class in America. I think it is a very realistic work, but my American students thought it was a work of fantasy. I found that I had to lecture in order to give my students some background so they could understand this book.

Beidler: I am glad that you mentioned the question of class size, Zheng Yi. I find that the discussion method is impossible in a class of more than 25 or 30. If university administrations do not cooperate in limiting class size, then teachers are forced to become lecturers, even though they may be absolutely opposed to lecturing as a means of teaching literature.

Cook: I'd like to comment on the discussion method. I think there are two different bases for defending the discussion method, sometimes called the Socratic method. One basis for using that technique is what we might call the Romantic basis. It assumes that students

naturally or intrinsically from the very beginning have a kind of innate wisdom. If you encourage them, or "get out of their way," they will suddenly come out with brilliant insights. It assumes that we will somehow corrupt the natural brilliance, or innocent brilliance, of students if we attempt to teach them something. That is not the assumption made by Plato, or by Socrates—the man who invented the Socratic method. It was made, however, by later Romantics like Wordsworth and Rousseau. These men shared the notion that we are better philosophers at birth than we are later, after we have been corrupted by knowledge from outside. But this Romantic notion of "equality among minds," this notion that we are all somehow the same, this rejection of hierarchy, of the idea that there are differences in intelligence, in knowledge, in wisdom, in experience, seems to be to be a dangerous fallacy.

But even if we see this fallacy, we can still view the discussion method as a valid approach to teaching. This second basis for the discussion we might call the authoritative basis. The basis of this view, which I hold, is the assumption that there is one person, usually an older person, who knows more than the others. That seems to be a safe enough assumption, really. I assume that as people live longer, learn more, have more experiences, they do know more than the others and so do have something to share. I defend the discussion method of teaching because it is an effective method of teaching, not because it helps these child philosophers discover the truth they have within them. When I use this method, I assume that most of the communicating is going from the older person, the teacher, to the younger ones, the students. Through the discussion method I teach not just information, but techniques of how to think, how to inquire, how to investigate.

My point is that we should not confuse the two different defenses of the Socratic method. Some of us are defending the method on the first of those bases. I defend it only on the second. The other I think is fallacious.

Beidler: That is a useful distinction to make, Rufus, though it may somewhat oversimplify what you call the first basis. Certainly, I do not think that babies are the best philosophers, and I would never deny the importance of either book-learning or experience.

I might add that in my view, the literature classroom gives us the ideal setting for using the discussion method. In a literature class, the text, the individual literary work, gives us almost all that we need to know from outside ourselves. I don't need to give a long lecture on Puritanism as background for an understanding of Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown," because a careful and sensitive reading of the story tells us, really, almost all we need to know about it. And when I ask my students to tell me what seems to characterize the Puritan mind as it is portrayed in that story, I am asking them merely to read the story carefully, to think about it creatively, and to discuss it boldly. I am not convinced that students need to have a ton of "background information" to understand a work of literature. They need to be shown how to read that work, how to discover in that work the truth it contains about people, and art, and history, and culture—and about themselves. The text gives my students the basic information they need. The discussion method gives me an effective way to encourage my students to make exciting discoveries about that text.

Song De-yi: I am Peter's student. I am sorry to say that I am a lazy student. I just want to tell you of my reaction to Peter's discussion method. Peter's questions in class forced me to

read the text very carefully. When I was lazy, I sometimes read the text very briefly, and then I did a poor job in the discussion. I also did a poor job in the daily quizzes he gave. Now I read more carefully and try to pay attention to what at first appeared to be small and insignificant details. I never did that before, and now I find that those details are often important, and I am learning a lot more about American literature. At first I was very unhappy with his discussion method, but now I like it.

Qu Xiao-hong: I want to ask Mr. Beidler what is the reason in our cultural background that makes us Chinese students so unwilling to talk in class?

Beidler: If you were one of my students, you would know that I am going to turn that question back to you. Why do you think that is so? After all, it is your background you are asking about, not mine. Why do you think Chinese students have such difficulty adjusting to the discussion method?

Qu Xiao-hong: It is because of the way we are raised. We are raised by our parents to be obedient, to do just what we are told, to pay attention to our elders. And we are taught that way, also, by our teachers. We are told not to have our own ideas, but to accept the ideas of the teachers, the leaders, the politicians, the other authorities. We have no training in speaking out our own ideas. It's a pity.

Ren Wen: I do not entirely agree. I think Chinese students, like American students, enjoy discussions. We very often have discussions among ourselves. But the trouble is that when certain topics are brought up for discussion in the classroom, we very often feel cowardly about talking about these things from our very narrow experience. So I want to know what American students do in the discussions. Since I am an undergraduate student, I am particularly concerned with how American undergraduates carry on those discussions.

Slaughter: I understand the problem you are talking about, and I think it relates to my notion about encouraging you to trust in your own voice, to get your voice back. But I want to say, first, that when I encourage students to get their own voices back, I do not mean that all voices, or all minds, are equal. I am not sure that serious Romantics ever said that, but I am sure that I never did.

To answer your question, I want to say something about the classroom. The classroom, as opposed to the lecture room, has to be a comfortable place. The classroom should be like a living room. It should feel good to you. You should be comfortable there. It should feel as if we were having a class in my living room at home. In that kind of environment, we can all feel freer to speak out our minds and our hearts. In such a setting, we can "negotiate" the meaning in a communal sense. Each of us has read the same text separately, privately, and then we come together comfortably to share our insights. We come together for a communal experience of the text. We test there our private, individual reading of the text, our opinions and interpretations. Students with students and teachers with students—we engage in an ongoing conversation in which we "negotiate" or work out a meaning we can agree on or at least understand.

For my part in such a conversation, I do not leave out my authority, my education, my experience, my writing, my research, my wit, my ability with words. I do not insist on those qualities as being of ultimate importance, but they are very much part of my contribution to the conversation. What is your contribution, as a student? Well, you bring your own life into the discussion with you. You bring your cultural background with you. You bring your personality with you. If it is your personality to be passive, to

be silent, to be polite, to be modest, to be deferential to teachers, to be obedient, well, that is your contribution to the conversation about the text we are discussing. I would hope that as the conversation becomes more comfortable for you, you will be less silent and deferential, but we go back and forth, back and forth in conversation and discussion. Any meaning that emerges from this is a collective meaning, a negotiated meaning. It is not a private, individual meaning that the teacher has imposed on the students, or one the student has imposed on the class. If we can all work together to create a comfortable environment for conversation, then everything will gradually become easier for all of us.

Ji Min: I want to ask Mr. Gridley a question about memorization of professors' remarks given in lectures. In my opinion teachers' lectures can be useful in providing us with information. It is true that memorization has been regarded as one of the major ways of learning, and this has kept students from developing their ability and their creativity. But in recent years, some Chinese educational officials have begun to be aware of the problems of memorization in that sense. I think there is a difference between passive memorization and active memorization. What do you think?

Gridley: Memorization is a traditional, and useful, way, but I want students of literature to spend their time memorizing literary texts, not professors' remarks. Memorization of professors remarks is worthless. It is passive, if you will. Memorizing literatary works is active. If you memorize a literary text, you will think about it in the process, and use it later for instant comparison with other texts and ideas. But if you try to memorize professors' remarks on those literary texts, you may not really think of debating those remarks, but of using them as truth. That also reminds me of a word, "plagiarism," which should be avoided by all of us. It is a serious thing for a writer to take other people's words as if they were his own words. In many ways, I prefer it if my students stay out of the library. In the library they tend to spend their time not reading poetry or other literary texts, but reading the written remarks on those texts. I wish that more of my students would work harder at reading the literary texts, and less hard at reading the comments of others on those texts.

Scherting: I have no inherent objection to memorization, but I would ask that we consider two questions. First, is it worth the time it takes to memorize? And second, could the time it takes to memorize be better spent doing something else?

Cook: My Chinese students recall the details of the literary texts better than my American students do, but that sometimes leads to problems. I would often prefer that they be more critical in their thinking about those texts, rather than remembering, word for word, or chapter by chapter, what those texts say.

Beidler: We have time for only one more question or comment.

Tien Jie: What I will say is related to what several of you have said.

Mr. Slaughter understands literature as equipment for living, as a life-support system. I respond strongly to his words because I have the same feeling. His words reinforce my confidence in pursuing the study of literature in a world that applauds pragmatism. China wants to develop into a more modernized country where we would have high technology that is of practical use and that can create miracles. But, what's the use of literature, when we have computers? Now I am reassured in my own choice of this field of literature, even against such doubts. Literature helps us to live our lives, to become better human beings capable of living a full, real life.

Mr. Scherting asked about the purpose of studying American literature. It seems to me that one purpose is to find parallels or differences among cultures. When Mr. Cook talked about the "showy individualism" of some of his American students, an idea struck me. If you are born into a culture, you tend to see the bad aspects or effects of that culture. In America, where individualism and the voice of the self go to extremes, sensitive people realize the necessity of a check, a halt. In China, on the other hand, a culture where unanimity, conformity, and the oneness of all may be taken to extremes, sensitive people are likely to seek something different. Here in China, I think we need more individualized thinking, more originality and judgment of our own, even though that may be exactly what your culture is trying to get rid of.

When Mr. Beidler said that he is trying to help his Chinese students who are afraid to talk, to express themselves, I felt an inner protest in me. We do talk, disagree, argue, and debate. For instance, many students and teachers more courageous than I have stood up and spoken their thoughts out loud today. But this was, I confess, somewhat unusual, and I now think that his words can be justified. In China, we often do disagree, but we are accustomed to keeping our thoughts to ourselves, or to reveal them to our close friends only, or to raise our complaints only after the occasion, when it is too late to make any changes.

I thought it interesting that Mr. Scherting said that literary studies might aid in modernizing China. This makes me see the importance of discussion. If we are bold enough to bring out our disagreements in public, we might turn our wonderful ideas into action. If we can do this, we might in effect change literary studies from something passive into something active. If we learn from our literary studies to talk more boldly, perhaps we literary students really can help to modernize China. Of course, I hope that our learning to speak more boldly will not go counter to the role of literature as a life-support system!